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ABSTRACT

The paper explores issues related to the provision of year-round schooling for gifted learners. Noted are individual differences among gifted learners, the trend toward providing differentiated curriculum in all content areas, and the importance of curriculum articulation. Reasons are offered to explain why many of the best gifted programs operate outside the school day, and concerns (such as limited access for disadvantaged families) about such program proliferation are raised. The extended school year is seen to offer gifted students regardless of socioeconomic status more time engaged in learning. Implementation of the year-round school concept requires flexible grouping arrangements, student choice, clear expectations regarding learning outcomes, flexibility in scheduling patterns, a spirit of innovation, use of community resources, and curriculum leadership. Includes three references. (DB)

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THE YEAR ROUND SCHOOL CONCEPT FOR GIFTED LEARNERS

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As one examines the concept of year round schools for gifted learners, it is useful to consider where the field of gifted education is in respect to programming efforts for this population and how the current state of the art would relate to the idea of year round schools. The purpose of this paper is to explore these issues and relationships.

Issues in Improving Instructional Programs for the Gifted:

The field of gifted education has come to recognize that gifted learners are not a homogeneous group to be thought of as singularly ready for program intervention. Rather gifted learners are highly individualistic in respect to learning capacity, learning aptitude areas or categories, learning styles, motivation, nature of learned experiences, and personality. Even when we carefully watch students on an index of ability variations in all of the other areas are apparent. Based on such learners differences then, it is necessary to provide an array of programs and services for differenct types of gifted learners. These programs and services should reflect accelerative, enriched, and counseling opportunities at all stages of development in various domains of inquiry. Just as an array of opportunities needs to be provided to the gifted, so too the time frame under which such provisions are made must be examined in light of the needs of the curriculum. For some areas of learning, larger chunks of time may be necessary, for others, less frequent time frames are appropirate. Saturdays and summers have worked well for many specialized topics of study for the gifted, partially because of their ability to be flexible regarding time or task.

There has been a major movement in the field toward greater comprehensiveness in the curriculum structure for the gifted. No longer do

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we see pull-out programs that provide a little language arts enrichment as appropriate enough for these students. Rather, there is a movement toward providing differentiated curriculum in all content areas as well as specialized areas of study. Allowing students to access appropriate curriculum also implies allowing for curricular flexibility. This may take the form of arranging advanced coursework to be taken by younger students, arranging independent study with a mentor in an area where a student is well advanced beyond his classmates, or dual enrollment in two different educational settings.

Finally, the field of gifted education views the issue of curriculum articulation as vital to effective programming. Practitioners should strive for the development of K-12 scope and sequence of curriculum in all areas of the school curriculum, delineated appropriately for the gifted learners. Only through such efforts will the fragmentation of options be brought under some control. Articulation not only of core content areas, but also of process skills such as critical and creative thinking and product expectations is crucial.

The Summer/Saturday School Dilemma for the Gifted

Based on data we have in the field (Cox, Daniels, and Boston, 1985), the best quality programs for the gifted may, in fact, be those operating outside of the school day. These programs have proliferated over the past 5-7 years so that there is no state in the country that does not have a summer or Saturday program model. Why is this the case? I would argue there are several reasons for it:

1. Gifted students require additional challenge and stimulation beyond the time frame of the current school week and year. (Many students go to Saturday programs over 30 weeks and 6-8 weeks of summer school.)

2. Given the child care limitations in this country more parents are seeing these programs as a viable way to provide "quality care" off school time.

3. Saturday/Summer programs typically are administrered and run separate from the school and thus do not adhere to the same rules and regulations and arbitrary organizational patterns - shifts in mixed grade grouping, early access to advanced coursework, instructional grouping by ability rather than age, flexible time frames, use of high-powered resources external to schools all illustrate this phenomenon. This situation then contributes to the attractiveness of such programs.

4. The cross fertilization of students in these programs is valued - meeting young people from other school districts, sometimes from other states, occasionally living together in residential settings.

5. These programs promote curriculum innovation and experimentation based on student interest - students <u>choose</u> courses (elective model).

Why should we have concerns about the proliferation of out-of-school programs for the gifted? It seems there are several good reasons for such concern:

1. These programs usually are tuition-based, so access to them depends on the ability of families to pay; consequently, disadvantaged gifted learners rarely have equal access.

2. These programs tend to attract the most "eager" among gifted learners - not underachieving, or handicapped students and typically fewer girls. Consequently, the majority of gifted learners are not being served by the model.

3. These programs have also contributed to the limitations of school-based programs for the gifted - the pressure is off and districts will point to these outside-of-school programs as even part of their offering. Consequently, inadvertently the summer/Saturday model may have hindered expanding program options in schools.

Enter the Year Round School Concept

What are the advantages of the year round concept for the gifted? Based on the direction programs and services for the gifted need to go, it is clear that more time on task will be required to bring comprehensive programming about in an effective manner. Based on the current status of Saturday and Summer programs, it is also equally clear that there is a need for additional learning opportunities for the gifted that do not restrict based on SES or type of giftedness or other defining characteristics of the learner. Clearly, the year round concept feeds into both of these issues as an attractive solution.

If we take the idea of competing effectively with other countries in the education arena seriously, then we must face up to the issue of students spending more time learning. Both Japan and Russia have extended school days and years - and as the Wirsup study (1985)has noted, their top students significantly outperform ours in critical areas of the curriculum. High powered development in any area is more directly related to how much time is expended in learning and experiencing that area than to any other single variable. Csikszentmihalyi and Larsen (1985) in their now classic study of

adolescence, found the major difference between high and low achievement among high ability students to be how they spent leisure time. Achievers used such time productively - in pursuit of learning in areas of interest. Underachievers used such time in random ways - hanging out, watching television, and socializing with friends.

Thus what we know about how the gifted achieve at higher levels and develop productive skills and attitudes relates directly to learning time. So the issue is not whether gifted students should be engaged in more learning time annually (the answer seems to be clearly yes) but rather on the nature and quality of that learning time.

Matching the Year Round School Concept to Gifted Learners' Needs

The year round school concept can have a most powerful effect on the gifted if certain conditions are honored in respect to the learning situations that are structured for them. If the year round concept merely sees itself as only an extension of current practice, then the gifted may not benefit optimally. If, however, the following conditions can be considered, the concept may become one of the best facilitation strategies available. The conditions under which this might occur are:

1. Flexible grouping arrangements for at least one quarter of the school year (ability, aptitude, and interest as major considerations)
2. Student choice in course-taking and project work
3. Clear expectations regarding learning outcomes (high standards) (different from "norm")
4. Flexibility in time modules and scheduling patterns (focus on developing independent learning habits)

5. A spirit of innovation and experimentation - trying out new course options, new strategies, etc.
6. Use of community resources including university personnel (parents and community involvement in both design and implementation of such a concept for the gifted is critical)
7. Curriculum leadership (implementation and monitoring)

Such a paradigm shift in the implementation of the year round concept may also be appealing in the fight to sell the idea to the referent groups who must be convinced of its viability.

Yet at the same time, it raises serious questions about the underlying intent of the year round concept as it is being implmented in many areas. If the concept is seen only as a more ecomonical way to deliver schooling based on burgeoning enrollment, then it will only be as beneficial for able students as their current program is. (This would be true at least for above average learners who do not suffer from retention difficulties.) If, however, the concept can come to be viewed as a true extension of learning time with a segment set aside for the gifted as I have described earlier, then it is clearly very attractive for gifted learners. Without the types of modifications in programming, however, the year round concept could actually reduce opportunities for gifted learners in schools and make them unavailable to access outside opportunities as well. Hopefully, the year round school educators can find implementation strategies that will enhance programs for gifted learners.

A final note about our conception of learning in this country. We recently have been barraged with developmental specialists delivering a message of "slow down, let children be children, let learning follow

development rather than precede it". We are also enamored of learning tools that stress the "fun of learning" - games, kits, cartoons, cutesy approaches. And we dearly love our education consultants whose message is entertaining, humorous, and inspirational. I consider all of these preferences as highly seductive but counter productive. Freud once said "there are only two things of value in this world - love and work". Helping students develop a passion for learning and the time to indulge that passion is perhaps the best gift we can bestow. To perpetuate the myth that learning is segmented, discontinuous, easy, and fun is to feed into a dangerous direction for education to move. The gifted, in particular, need to understand that all worthwhile learning takes time, is difficult, is occasionally frustrating but ultimately rewarding. And that growth - intellectual and otherwise - is only attained by <u>working</u> at the learning process continuously. The year round concept makes it possible to help students internalize that idea.

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